

## Coming Home

The Swiss have always been emigrants. When Switzerland was a poor country, they left it as mercenaries, then as craftsmen, master builders, whatever, and when they returned, they built mansions to show off the fortune they had made abroad. Nowadays Switzerland is a rich country, which is also a reason to go into exile, but for a different group of emigrants. It can't be denied either that prosperity inverts the mental climate, that it supports inflexibility, inertia, uneventfulness and self-righteousness. It might be a romantic cliché to say that art always comes from suffering. And yet, hunger is always more useful to passion than is satiety. There is a wonderful quote by the Austrian writer Alexander Roda-Roda: "Lucky those who are Swiss-born. It is also beautiful to die as Swiss. But what are you going to do in the meantime?" In his book "Diskurs in der Enge", which led to a rather fashionable debate in the seventies, Paul Nizon conceived narrowness in a spiritual rather than a material or geographical sense. However you take it, the homecomer is in both senses a central character of Swiss culture. He considers the country which he left, the region he stems from, and his childhood differently, more critically or sentimentally, at any rate, no longer naively. "I have a different vision of Switzerland today", says Roman Schwaller.

The canton of Thurgau, that triangle located between Lake Constance and the prealpine hills at the border with the cantons of Zurich and St. Gallen, is in some ways as Swiss as Switzerland can be: a well-tempered and still very agrarian region, and an uneventful one (at least at first sight). No urban centers. Omnipresence in the average. Even in plebiscites and elections, the canton of Thurgau nearly always represents the Swiss average. It was here, of all places, that Roman Schwaller was born almost fifty years ago, in Frauenfeld in 1957. Here, he spent a peaceful childhood, attended the Teachers Training College (in Kreuzlingen), and it was here, in 1974, that jazz hit him like a hammer, like a bolt of lightning while listening to one of Oscar Peterson's uplifting piano solo records, which put an end to "The Shepherd On the rocks" and other sophisticated stuff for classical clarinet. The sound of Bern's alto saxophonist Heinz Bigler, who has fallen a little into oblivion, prompted Schwaller to attend the "Swiss Jazz School Bern". Roman then switched to the bigger horn, and like a massive wave, the whole great tradition of tenor saxophone crashed over and clashed in him: Rollins and Trane, Booker Ervin, Hank Mobley, George Coleman, Clifford Jordan, Johnny Griffin, etc., you name 'em, but especially Dexter Gordon. Andy Scherrer, who was his young teacher back then, helped Schwaller to find himself in this ocean of sounds, timbres and individual shades. All of which was not totally natural, and rather a European thing: do not forget

here that the heyday of hardbop had passed almost a generation ago, that rock was threatening to marginalize jazz (at least in the States), and that the postbop-renaissance, a result of Dexter Gordon's triumphal return to the U.S.A., was still to come. Schwaller's first explorations took him to Stuttgart and Munich. At twenty Munich became his domicile, in a dual sense. Munich's famous jazz club "domicile" was one of the hot spots of the scene, namely in Schwaller's stylistic segment, modern mainstream, and he was soon sharing the stage with those who, not too long ago, had been his heroes. "Modern Straight Ahead" was now the language in which he told his stories – always new, with a big, flexible tone, terse and fluent. He still plays like that today, although he has become more economical and displays an almost frightening command. From 1979 to 1989 he was a member of Mathias Rüegg's "Vienna Art Orchestra". In Munich, he worked with Dusko Goykovich, Joe Haider, with Johnny Griffin and Sal Nistico in the powerful tenor trio "Three Generations of Tenor Saxophone" ("three tenors" here, too); with Mel Lewis and Wolfgang Haffner, the quintet "Saxophone Connection", the "Munich Saxophone Family", with "Lost Jazz Generation", a sextet which also featured George Gruntz, Franco Ambrosetti, and Daniel Humair. His collaboration with drummer Jimmy Cobb turned into a regular affair, and together with Andy Scherrer he formed the "Swiss Tenors". However, Schwaller was also attracted by larger forms; as such, he wrote music for a nonet, almost a little big band. By this time, Roman Schwaller had already returned to Switzerland and, of course, chosen Frauenfeld as a basis for his operations. But that's not the whole story. Schwaller also brought a unique festival to the town he comes from: a biennial jazz week during which the small town in Eastern Switzerland hosts students working on master classes, who play all night sessions in small venues, jam with their teachers, and are presented with fellowship awards. This is the most relaxed and intimate festival around and now another spot on the jazz map on which rather boring Swiss villages turn into musical capitals: Willisau, Hunziken, Langenthal, Chiasso. And Frauenfeld, needless to say. Jazz is urban music, no doubt, but in the meantime the cities have become villages, and the village is global and the transition between them is a smooth one. Whether someone's a country bumpkin or not is just a matter of mentality.

The suite that Roman Schwaller has written with a grant from his home canton is the most comprehensive piece he has ever produced. Its eight movements have something to do with his career, but it would be too much already to state that they are a reflection of it. This music is not at all programmatic, it's not even an exercise in stylistic successions: Schwaller wrote an integrated suite with many a rupture and tight curves, but with a single stylistic approach, and tailor-made for this band's musicians. It's the best band he ever had: a rhythm section that plays

with instinctive assurance, and a tremendously classicist frontline with enormous density and flexibility. No matter how tightly knit the arrangements were at times (some of it reminds us of the finest editions of Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers, e.g. the sextet from the "Ugetsu" phase), Derrick Gardner and Adrian Mears play them with such fluidity and speed they make it sound like head arrangements from the old days of swing and riffs. Three titles are first takes, and not a single tune had to be recorded three times, which is why this music, the fundamentals of which are not totally unfamiliar, is so fresh. All in all, these vitally playful individualists make sure that there is no separation between compulsory and free sections in this rather densely-knit succession of written and improvised parts.

The musicians:

Derrick Gardner (trumpet), b. Chicago, 1965. Among others, he worked with the Count Basie Orchestra, Frank Foster, Dizzy Gillespie, George Benson, Nancy Wilson, Clark Terry, Rufus Reid, Joe Williams, James Moody, Harry Connick Jr. and with his own sextet, "The Jazz Prophets". Trumpet professor at Michigan State University.

Adrian Mears (trombone), b. 1969, is considered *the* great Australian talent on trombone. Also a prolific composer, Mears has been living in Europe for 12 years now. He has worked with the McCoy Tyner Big Band, James Morrison, Don Pullen, Eddie Palmieri, Paquito D'Rivera, Bobby Shew, Charlie Mariano, Kenny Wheeler, and Jeff Williams. He is a regular member of the "Vienna Art Orchestra". Latest CD release as a leader: "New Orleans Hardbop" (TCB). He teaches at the Jazzschule Basel.

Oliver Kent (piano), b. Innsbruck, Austria, 1969; studied at Vienna Conservatory. Concerts and tours with Art Farmer, Johannes Enders, Karl Ratzler, Jimmy Cobb, Benny Bailey, Eddie Henderson, Franco Ambrosetti, and others. Composition commissions for "Moons Around Venus" (Ingrid Jensen and Herwig Gradischnig). Leads a band of his own ("Selim"). Teaching assignment at Vienna Conservatory; in 2002, Hans Koller Award in the Category "Sideman Of the Year".

Thomas Stabenow (bass), b. 1952. Studied at "Musikhochschule Stuttgart", currently a professor at "Musikhochschule Mannheim" and owner of the record label "Bassic Sound". Until 1998 he was a member of Peter Herbolzheimer's "Rhythm Combination & Brass". Performed with Stan Getz, Eartha Kitt, Chaka Khan, Al Jarreau, Charlie Mariano, Dave Friedman, Dianne Reeves, and others.

Mario Gonzi (drums), b. 1966 in Vienna, where he also resides today. He performed with Art Farmer, Johnny Griffin, Benny Bailey, Scott Hamilton, Bob Berg, Bob Brookmeyer, Dado Moroni, Clark Terry, Benny Golson, among others, and is a regular member of the “Vienna Art Orchestra“, the group “Gansch & Roses”, and Klaus Dickbauer’s “Nature Way”. In 2001: Hans Koller Award in the category “Sideman Of the Year”. President of the Frank Sinatra Research Institute.

Peter Rüedi, October 2005  
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